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"Gleaming with gold and blue and cinnabar": William Morris's Colourful Revision of the Myth of the Golden Fleece

Charlotte Ribeyrol

1 William Morris's "Life and Death of Jason" is very little read today, like many of his longer poetic narratives. And yet, there were no fewer than twelve British re-editions and one American reprinting before the publication of the *Collected Works* in 1910. This poem of epic length composed of seventeen books, two of which containing over a thousand lines, indeed received critical acclaim when it was first published in 1867. For instance, the literary critic Joseph Knight praised the text as "full of wonderful colour", "a song of the golden days of Saturn [...] like the famous 'Happy Age of Gold' in the Pastor Fido of Guarini" (Faulkner 53-54).[1] Although the poem was partly inspired by Geoffrey Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*,[2] Morris's sources were mainly classical, ranging from Homer's *Odyssey*, to Euripides' *Medea* and of course, Apollonius' *Argonautica*, which was composed in third century BCE Alexandria. However, Morris's indebtedness to these ancient sources did not quite follow the model of "legacy" on which most of the "classical tradition" was then based. This model was being more and more challenged at the time as ancient Greece was both turned into an ideologically charged cultural paradigm and re-discovered as potentially *primitive* by the emerging sciences of archaeology and anthropology. Morris's interest in Greek myth in "The Life and Death of Jason"—which was his first classical tale—partly prefigures this turning-point in classical studies and notably the striking shift, which occurred in the last quarter of the century, from a philological apprehension of Hellenism to the unearthing of more forgotten aspects of ancient Greek art and culture. What I wish to show in this article is that Morris's use of gold as a proliferating and polysemous signifier in "The Life and Death of Jason" reflects and partakes of what classical reception theory has defined as a "hybrid" (Hardwick 9)

rather than a strictly mimetic relation to Antiquity, which will be explored thanks to a threefold approach:

2 The "gleaming" of the metal ore first appears as a structuring force both in the original myth and in Morris's rewriting of it, as it triggers off Jason's double quest: i.e. the quest for the Golden Fleece itself and for the golden-haired Medea who is the other "prize" that the hero longs to possess. The gold of the Fleece therefore appears as a metaphor for the hero's ambition, which will eventually cause his downfall, in the shape of the burning gold mantle ironically offered by Medea to Jason's bride, Glauce.

3 But in this poem, the role of gold is not only diegetic or metaphoric, as shown by the fact that it is granted pride of place within the complex chromatic economy of Morris's poem, in association with other age-old costly pigments such as the mineral red of cinnabar. If the Golden Fleece is never precisely described, the beautiful and colourful ornaments and decorations of the ancient palaces Jason visits on his quest are, on the contrary, precisely detailed. Thanks to such a chromatic alliance, Morris succeeded in shedding light on the wealth of the arts and crafts of this bygone golden age which he and his artist friends equally sought to emulate in their textile and ceramic works for the firm "Morris and Co".

4 Finally, the link between the textual and the visual signals the last form of hybridity which I would like to highlight in this paper, a hybridity of an intermedial nature, as the myth of the Golden Fleece not only generated a plurality of texts but also a plurality of images, as illustrated by Frederick Sandys's 1868 painting representing Euripides' eponymous heroine against a golden background and within a golden frame. Like Evelyn de Morgan, who was equally drawn to the myth of Medea, Sandys was a follower of the Pre-Raphaelites.[3] Although Morris, Burne-Jones and de Morgan were quite sympathetic to the Colchian princess as a deserted woman, I will try and show in this concluding section of my essay that Sandys's emphasis on Medea's *pharmaka*, meaning both drug and colour in Greek, was far more eroticized than Morris's.

Frederick Sandys, *Medea* (1868), oil on canvas, 61.2x45.6cm, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Creative Commons

“To take withal this gold and this fair maid” (IX, 131): Jason’s double quest for gold

5 Gold is omnipresent in Morris’s “Life and Death of Jason”, as if Morris were expanding on the diegetic importance attributed to gold in the ancient myth. The noun “gold” (sometimes spelt with a capital G)[4] as well as the adjective “golden” frequently appear in prominent position in his verse, notably at the end of a line where gold is often made to rhyme with “hold” in order to show that the metal ore not only structures the whole of the quest but is also endowed with a “heroizing value” (Grand-Clément 2011, 326). This is well exemplified by this passage taken from Book IX which describes Jason’s seizing of the Fleece:

> Therewith he threw the last door open wide,
> Whose hammered iron did the marvel hide,
> And shut his dazzled eyes, and stretched his hands
> Out toward the sea-born wonder of all lands,
> And plunged them deep within the locks of *gold,*
> Grasping the Fleece within his mighty *hold.* (IX, 130)

6 The first object of Jason’s search is obviously the Golden Fleece itself, as shown by the strategic positioning of the adjective at the end of the line which graphically illustrates the movement of the quest. The Fleece was originally that of the winged ram Chrysomallos, born of the nymph Theophane, granddaughter of the sun titan Helios, and the god Poseidon, who, in the form of a ram, seduced the nymph (Venable 128). This ram is described in Book II of Morris’s poem:

A mighty ram, greater than such beasts be
In any land about the Grecian sea;
And in all else a wonder to men's eyes,
For from his shoulders did two wings arise,
That seemed as they were wrought of beaten gold,
And all his fleece was such as in no fold
The shepherd sees, for all was gold indeed. (II, 26)

7 According to the mythical genealogy, the gold of the fleece (inscribed in the very name of the ram—*chryso-mallos* which literally means "golden-haired") is associated both with the gleaming force of the sun-rays and with a form of erotic power, reminiscent of the myth of Danae, which would later be illustrated by Sandys in a wood engraving entitled *Danae in the Brazen Chamber*.[5] This close connexion of gold and eroticism (Grand-Clément 2011, 327-328) is further developed in Apollonius' version of the myth in which Jason and Medea consummate their wedding night *on* the very Fleece (Apollonius 4.1141-43, 421)[6]—an episode prudishly left aside by Morris.

Danae in the Brazen Chamber (c. 1888), Joseph Swain, after Frederick Sandys, Wood engraving on India paper; proof, 18.4x12.1cm, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Creative Commons

8 But gold was also a divine attribute in Antiquity. Dominic James, in *God and Gold in Late Antiquity,* notes that "pagan gods were often marked out by gold in the classical world. For instance in poetic convention, Helios had a gold chariot and bed, Apollo a gold cloak etc." (James 19).[7] Like Apollo *krusokomas*, Jason is described both in Greek sources and in Morris's poem as golden-haired,[8] as his quest is sanctioned by the Olympian divinities (including the "Golden goddess" Juno / Hera, XVII, 266) who help the Argonauts overcome the obstacles encountered during their journey.

9 The second object of Jason's quest is Medea herself, who appears at first as the ideal trophy wife. The Colchian princess is also said to be golden-haired (IX, 133), in keeping with some antique sources, which Gustave Moreau, for instance, closely followed for his

painting of the mythical couple.[9] However, the complexion of Colchian women seems to have been dark rather than blond leading Peter Green to suggest that Medea may have had "prescriptions (*pharmaka*) to achieve so fashionable an appearance" as if she were in fact 'a bottle blond'" (Green 274). But Morris does not allude to such chromatic or capillary controversies: for him, Medea is simply fair, as becomes a divine princess, whether antique or medieval. Even if he makes her cover her blond hair and pale skin with a dark cloak when she performs her magic rituals, Morris's decision to emphasize Medea's diaphanous beauty contrasts strikingly with certain revisions of the classical myth, which depict her as a dark, dangerous sorceress and infanticide, as in Euripides' eponymous play. Morris's blond Medea, on the other hand, corresponds much more to the model of the "helper-maiden" (Clauss and Johnston 5-6),[10] resorting to white magic and beneficent *pharmaka* to save Jason from the dragon, as if the Victorian poet wanted to rehabilitate the reviled heroine. This is very much in keeping with Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* as well as with Ovid's *Heroides* which both depict Medea in a favorable light, deliberately leaving aside references to her witchcraft and crimes.

Gustave Moreau, *Jason et Médée* (1865), oil on canvas, 204x121.5cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, Creative Commons

10 Following Chaucer and Ovid, Morris and Burne-Jones designed in 1862 a series of tiles representing the "martyrdom" of Philomela, Hypsipyle,[11] Medea and Cleopatra for the house of the painter John Roddam Spencer-Stanhope. All of these female figures are presented as angelic blondes, a motif taken up in the later textile and stained-glass versions imagined by the firm "Morris and Co." When Evelyn de Morgan—Spencer-Stanhope's niece—first exhibited her very Botticelli-like painting of a golden-haired *Medea* at the New Gallery in 1890, it was accompanied by a quotation from Morris's "Life and Death of Jason" stressing the suffering of Medea as the cause of her fall (Lawton Smith 102). This is also what the initial title of Morris's poem suggests: "The Deeds of

Jason", which Florence Boos analyzed as a significant "shift of focus from heroic 'feats' to their antiheroic undoing", thus criminalizing Jason rather than Medea.[12]

Evelyn de Morgan, *Medea* (1889), oil on canvas, Williamson Art Gallery and Museum, Birkenhead, UK, Creative Commons

11 Gold therefore plays a strong structural role in both antique sources and Morris's re-interpretation of the myth which paradoxically succeeds in turning the Colchian sorceress into a blond "Angel in the House" led astray by a cunning deceiver whose lust for gold, whether that of the Fleece or of his beloved's dazzling hair, appears as a key visual motif in the tale. There is therefore quite an ironic dimension to Medea's gift of a gold mantle to Jason's wife-to-be, Glauce:

> [...] and last they took
> Medea's gift, and all the folds outshook,
> And in a cool room looking toward the north,
> They clad the queen therewith, nor brought her forth
> Till over all a gold cloak they had laid.
> [...]
> While Glauce, trembling with her shamefast joy,
> With the gold mantle's clasp began to toy,
> Eager to cast that covering off, and feel
> The hero's mighty arms about her steal.
> Giddy with joy one moment did he gaze
> And saw his love her slender fingers raise
> Unto the mantle's clasp, the next the hall
> Was filled with darting flames from wall to wall,
> And bitter screams rang out, as here and there,
> Scorched, and with outspread arms, the damsels fair. (XVII, 288)

12 Here Morris diverges slightly from the Euripidean source in which Medea offers Jason's beloved a multicoloured (*poikilia*) veil as well as a golden tiara. Leaving the dazzling colours of the veil aside, Morris seems to suggest that gold—the metaphor and metonymy

of Jason's ambition and greed—is the prime cause of Glauce's death, rather than Medea's witchcraft.

13 The conflation of the materialistic, metaphorical and aesthetic dimension of gold is somewhat reminiscent of one of Théophile Gautier's short stories entitled "The Golden Fleece" (1839) which relates the adventures of a belated Jason-like figure, Tiburce, who embarks on an impossible quest to find a blond mistress resembling Rubens's northern beauties, what Gautier calls "le pourchas du blond":

> [...] il était urgent pour lui d'aller en Belgique – au *pourchas du blond*. – Ce Jason d'une nouvelle espèce, en quête d'une autre toison d'or, prit le soir même la diligence de Bruxelles avec la précipitation d'un banqueroutier las du commerce des hommes et sentant le besoin de quitter la France, cette terre classique des beaux-arts, des belles manières et des gardes du commerce. (Gautier 778)

14 In this passage by Gautier, whose works were admired in Morris's circle, and by A.C. Swinburne and D.G. Rossetti in particular, Tiburce longs to replace the economic value of gold (evoked through the reference to bankruptcy and trade) by a more aesthetic and erotic radiance, encapsulated in the golden hues of his dream mistress's hair. In "The Life and Death of Jason", Morris also seems to try and escape the materialistic imperatives of his age by reverting to a time when the value of gold was not purely monetary.

"There ought to be a great deal of gold in it" (Kelvin 1: 56): Tales from a Golden Age

15 Morris's poem was not just about the legend of the Golden Fleece. It emphasizes the hero's rise and fall, as he sacrifices his love for Medea in favour of his ambition to gain the Golden Fleece, the symbol of his quest for ambition and power. But according to Raymond Descat, gold in ancient Greece was *not* initially used as a form of currency but as a pure luxury or votive offering, endowed in both instances with a symbolic as well as aesthetic function (Descat 429-439). The Fleece therefore appears as a highly religious and political signifier, the economic value of which would have been only secondary, in spite of later theories claiming that fleeces may have been used in Ancient Greece to sieve the gold found in rivers. Such theories are alluded to in Connop Thirlwall's *History of Greece* (1832) who explains that:

> [...] some of the later writers among the ancients [...] perceived that the whole story turned on the golden fleece, the supposed motive of the voyage, and that this feature had not a sufficiently historical appearance. But the mountain torrents of Colchis were said to sweep down particles of gold, which the natives used to detain by fleeces dipped in the streams. This report suggested a mode of translating the fable into historical language. [...] It was conjectured that the Argonauts had been attracted by the metallic treasures of the country, and that the golden fleece was a poetical description of the process which they had observed, or perhaps had practised: an interpretation certainly more ingenious, or at least less absurd than Diodorus's interpretation; but yet not more satisfactory; for it explains a casual, immaterial circumstance, while it leaves the essential point in the legend wholly untouched. The epithet golden to which it relates, is merely poetical and ornamental, and signified nothing more as to the nature of the fleece than the epithets white or purple which were also applied to it by early poets. (Thirlwall 1, 162-163)[13]

16 However, in Apollonius' version of the myth and in Morris's revision of it, Jason needs to retrieve the Fleece to assert his authority and legitimacy in the face of the usurper Pelias. John Kevin Newman even goes as far as to claim that this quest is an imperialistic[14] one, quoting from several antique sources metaphorically associating the gold of the Fleece with power. For instance, in his fourth *Eclogue*, Virgil announces a change in regime at Rome by using the following metaphor: "The very ram in the pastures will shortly colour its fleece with the soft blush of purple, with the yellow tint of saffron" (Newman 315). Not only are purple and gold presented here as costly royal hues, but the implicit comparison with the changing colours of the setting sun metaphorically signals the end of an era. A similar combination of purple and gold is found in Apollonius' description of the Fleece, the burning colour of which anticipates the destruction of Jason's bride:

> [...] so joyfully then did Jason lift up the great fleece in his hand, and upon his golden cheeks and forehead there settled a red glow like a flame from the shimmering of the wool. (Apollonius 4.177-8, 343)

17 In Morris's poem the Fleece is said to be "of curling ruddy gold" (XVI, 253).[15] The association of red and gold is also frequent to describe precious objects. For instance King Aëetes, brother of Circe and father to Medea, is described "with red gold crowned" (VIII, 112). It is indeed as if Morris displaced the materiality of the Golden Fleece— turned into a metaphoric and immaterial signifier of Jason's ambition—onto that of the precious objects ornamenting the *décor* of his tale.

18 Although he does not mention any of these quotations, Newman refers to Morris's 19th-century revision of the myth in his reading of the Golden Fleece as an "imperial dream", partly reflecting Victorian imperialistic aspirations. However it is quite clear Morris stood aloof from such jingoistic interests, which he shunned in favour of poetic dreams of a golden age.[16] If he denounced the greed of his contemporaries, he nonetheless embraced the rich material culture of the past. In this Morris was certainly indebted to his mentor John Ruskin, whose *Unto this Last* (1860) addressed the ambiguous value of gold, as both an artistic and economic signifier. Discussing "the nature of Utility", Ruskin explains:

> And first of possession. At the crossing of the transepts of Milan Cathedral has lain, for three hundred years, the embalmed body of St. Carlo Borromeo. It holds a golden crosier, and has a cross of emeralds on its breast. Admitting the crosier and emeralds to be useful articles, is the body to be considered as "having" them? Do they, in the politico-economical sense of property, belong to it? If not, and if we may, therefore, conclude generally that a dead body cannot possess property, what degree and period of animation in the body will render possession possible?
>
> As thus: lately in a wreck of a Californian ship, one of the passengers fastened a belt about him with two hundred pounds of gold in it, with which he was found afterwards at the bottom. Now, as he was sinking—had he the gold? or had the gold him? (Ruskin 17, 86)

This quotation in turn sheds light on a passage from *The Queen of the Air* (1869) which explicitly refers to Morris's poem:

> And as it has been the madness of economists to seek for gold instead of life, so it has been the madness of kings to seek for land instead of life.
>
> So that you may obtain a more truthful idea of the nature of Greek religion and legend from the poems of Keats, and the nearly as beautiful, and, in general grasp of subject, far more powerful, recent work of Morris, than from frigid scholarship, however extensive. Not that the poet's impressions or renderings of things are wholly true, but their truth is vital, not formal. (Ruskin 19, 309-310)

19 Similarly Morris rejected the lust for a tainted and deathly gold which characterized his capitalistic age in favour of the more alluring colours of the past, whether antique or medieval. His "Jason" reflects an eclectic conflation of the Middle Ages and Antiquity both in the imagery and in the vocabulary used which recall Homeric as well as Chaucerian archaisms (Newman 338). According to Walter Pater, Morris was indeed a "Hellenist of the middle age". Commenting on "Jason", Pater describes at length these "charming anachronisms":

> The gilded vanes on the spires, the bells ringing in the towers, the trellis of roses at the window, the close planted with apple-trees, the grotesque undercroft with its close-set pillars, change by a single touch the air of these Greek cities and we are at Glastonbury by the tomb of Arthur. The nymph in furred raiment who seduces Hylas is conceived frankly in the spirit of Teutonic romance; her song is of a garden enclosed, such as that with which the glass-stainer of the middle ages surrounds the mystic bride of the song of songs. Medea herself has a hundred touches of the medieval sorceress, the sorceress of the Streckelberg or the Blocksberg; her mystic changes are Christabel's. (Pater 1868, 222-223)

20 In spite of such "gilded" medievalisms, Morris's "earthly paradise" is strongly reminiscent of the Arcadian "golden dream" (I, 4) described in antique sources. According to Jackie Murray, "this is consistent with the notion that ever since the Golden Age human-divine interaction had become progressively less open, and that the generation of heroes who saw the fall of Troy were the last to interact with the gods openly at all. Since the Argo is a product of the generation before the Fall of Troy, it was constructed in a time when the gods were closer to mortals" (Murray 94). In Morris's poem, this constructive collaboration of gods and mortals is taken quite literally as he goes into detail to describe the actual building of the ship[17], an episode partly left aside by Apollonius. But the ship is not meant to resemble a specific archeological artefact. Morris even comments on his vague notions of archeology in the following passage from a letter to Morgan George Watkins:

> As for my archeology I'm afraid you will find little of it in Jason, [...] my towns belong rather to the Cinque-Cento or Jacobaean period than the Homeric or rather pre-Homeric, and [...] there is more of Lincoln or Rouen than of Athens in them, let alone Tiryns or Mycenae. (Kelvin 1: 53)

21 Here Morris emphasizes once more the eclectic and anachronistic nature of his inspiration and yet what is also revealed by this quotation is a desire to retrieve the rich material (rather than materialistic) culture of an idealized past. This may in turn explain why the Argo is described as "gleaming with gold, and blue and cinnabar" (III, 53),[18] in keeping with the other beautiful artefacts (vases, jewellery...) which the Argonauts admire at each stage of their journey. This chromatic triad would reappear in later texts, notably in an 1878 letter to his daughter May in which Morris describes an Arabian room "all vermillion & gold & ultramarine very beautiful" (Kelvin 1: 465). It therefore seems as if gold, when metaphorically signifying a materialistic urge—as with Jason's ambitious quest for the Golden Fleece or the golden-haired Medea—was rejected by Morris, in favour of the material beauty of the arts and crafts of Antiquity which he embraced and sublimated into an aesthetic celebration of a golden age.

22 Gold indeed testified to Morris's intense and nostalgic chromophilia. Like Pater, he believed "the heroic age of Greek art" to be "an age of real gold, an age delighting itself in precious material and exquisite handiwork" (Pater 1880, 210). However, Morris's passion for costly pigments and golden artefacts was not a passion for wealth, but a passion for

beauty, fostered by a desire to emulate the know-how of ancient craftsmen. Gold was the most steadfast of hues which could not be imitated thanks to cheaper modern synthetic colouring devices. Morris was so nostalgic about his colours that he read medieval herbals to find the right, original recipes for some of his dyes which he wanted to be both stable and dazzling. He also read Pliny's *Natural History* which defines gold as "the only thing that loses no substance by the action of fire [...] fire serves a test of its goodness, making it assume a similar red hue and itself becomes the colour of fire" (Pliny 33.19.47-49).

23 But this quest for the rich pigments of the past also reflects a political stance as Morris strongly distrusted the new artificial colours which chemists were then devising for the expanding textile industry. He stresses this point very clearly in several of his lectures:

> The dye-stuffs discovered by the indefatigable genius of scientific chemists, which everyone has heard of under the name of aniline colours, and which are the product of coal-tar, are brighter and stronger in colour than the old dyes, cheaper (much cheaper) in price, and, which is of course of the last importance to the dyer, infinitely easier to use. No wonder, therefore, that they have almost altogether supplanted the older dyes, except in a few cases: surely the invention seems a splendid one! Well, it is only marred by one fact. [...] The fact is, that every one of these colours is hideous in itself, whereas all the old dyes are in themselves beautiful colours; only extreme perversity could make an ugly colour out of them. [...] We must relegate these new dyes to a museum of scientific curiosities, and for our practice go back, if not to the days of the Pharaohs, yet at least to those of Tintoret. I say I invite you to consider this, because it is a type of the oppression under which the lesser arts are suffering at the present day. (Morris 22: 256-257)[19]

24 In this highly policitized diatribe, Morris powerfully articulates the modernity of cheap, artificial dyes with a form of aesthetic decline. He invites his audience to shun such "scientific curiosities" in favour of the age-old materials used by the Egyptians and the Venetian colorists, who had cherished a "heavenly"[20] lapis-lazuli blue, which, in the Renaissance, became even more expensive than gold. Morris thus implies that the practice of colour, whether dye or pigment, is a forgotten craft which needs to be retrieved. This nostalgic chromophilia is perfectly illustrated in his "The Life and Death of Jason" as shown by the following quotation taken from Book VI:

> [...] such are we,
> But wayfarers upon the troublous sea,
> Careful of that stored up within our hold,
> *Phoenician scarlet, spice, and Indian gold,*
> *Deep-dyeing weeds, and woad and cinnabar*,
> Wrought arms and vessels, and all things that are
> Desired so much by dwellers in all lands. (VI, 94)

Morris may have had Chaucer in mind when he listed such costly dyes. The medieval poet, who was comptroller of the customs for the port of London, had certainly inspected such colourful riches, which feature in his poetry:

> No mader, welde, or wood (woad) no litestere (dyer)
> Ne Knew; the flees (fleece) was of his former hewe.[21]

25 In this passage from "The Former Age" (1374), Chaucer contrasts the natural colours of the Golden Age (here symbolized by the white "fleece") with the colourful, artificial substances used in his own modern and decadent age. As noted by Diana R. Uhlman, in this anti-materialistic poem, "dyes and dyeing are apt metonymies for the giant industry and commerce of cloth, a 'bysinesse' that, fueled by the desire for 'profit' and 'richesse', leads to 'darknesses' and 'cursednesse'" (Uhlman 189). In the Prologue to "The

Wanderers" of the *Earthly Paradise* (of which "The Life and Death of Jason" was meant to be part), Morris modernizes and reverses this comparison. The costly dyes and "gold cloth" of the past now epitomize a disappearing Golden Age, threatened by the darkening pollution of the industrial world:

> Forget six counties overhung with smoke,
> Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,
> Forget the spreading of the hideous town;
> Think rather of the pack-horse on the down,
> And dream of London, small and white and clean,
> The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green;
> Think, that below bridge the green lapping waves
> Smite some few keels that bear [...]
> Pointed jars that Greek hands toiled to fill,
> And treasured scanty spice from some far sea,
> Florence gold cloth, and Ypres napery,
> And cloth of Bruges, and hogsheads of Guienne;
> While nigh the thronged wharf Geoffrey Chaucer's pen
> Moves over bills of lading. (Morris 1868, 3: 3)

26 But Morris's fascination for ancient chromatic appreciation and practice can equally be felt in his artistic creations at the time. For instance, in a letter to his former schoolmaster Frederick Barlow Guy, whom he thanks for his praise of "The Life and Death of Jason", Morris describes in the following terms the luxurious decoration designed for the chapel in the Forest School, in Walthamstow: "[...] there ought to be a great deal of gold in it; the part between the bands ought to be at least of marble or alabaster. I don't want to discourage any reasonable plan, but I should think panelling the proper thing for your east end, picked out with colour and gold if you please" (Kelvin 1: 55-56). This description clearly highlights Morris's desire to emulate the chromatic wealth and material splendour of medieval churches, which he admired as much as the aesthetic treasures of Ancient Greece. Similarly, Catherine Holiday, Morris's favourite embroiderer, celebrated his painstaking chromatic creations, notably his golds, which, however "new" and original, recalled the beauty of Nature's colours in the manner of the craftmen of old:

> There was a peculiar beauty in his dyeing that no one else in modern times has ever attained to. He actually did create new colours then in his amethysts and golds and greens, they were different to anything I have ever seen; he used to get a marvellous play of colour into them. The amethyst had flushings of red; and his gold (one special sort), when spread out in the large rich hanks, looked like a sunset sky. (MacCarthy 359)

Here again the materiality of Morris's gold dye seems almost de-materialized for aesthetic ends, its "rich" and possibly reddish dye conjuring up the poetic image of the sunset sky.

"Golden lines of rhyme" (VIII, 113): From text to image, from image to text

27 Both Morris's verse and his artistic endeavours therefore reflected his quest for a bygone golden age. This artistic approach to gold as one of the most precious ores of the past equally highlights the close links between text and image in both Morris's poem and his classical sources.

28 The myth of the Golden Fleece indeed generated multiple texts and visual artefacts. This is partly due to the gleaming nature of the Fleece itself, depicted as an emphatically visual object, fascinating the happy few allowed to behold it, as shown by Morris's frequent association of the words "gold" and "behold" in his heroic couplets. Each mention of the adjective "gold" in the poem seems to invite aesthetic contemplation, as in the following examples:

> And in his hand a cup of *ruddy gold*
> King Pelias takes; and now may ye *behold*
> The broad new-risen sun light up the God,
> Who, holding in his hand the crystal rod
> That rules the sea, stands by Dædalian art
> Above his temple, set right far apart
> From other houses, nigh the deep green sea. (IV, 55)
> If ye be bold with us to go,
> Things such as happy dreams may show
> Shall your once heavy eyes *behold*
> About our palaces of *gold;*
> Where waters 'neath the waters run,
> And from o'erhead a harmless sun
> Gleams through the woods of chrysolite. (XIX, 200)

The dazzling sight of gold is thus what triggers off the ekphrastic impulse, the articulation of text and image, perfectly illustrated and encapsulated in the final couplet of his poem: "And now is all that ancient story *told* / Of him who won the guarded Fleece of *Gold*" (XVII, 296).

29 However in the case of the Fleece one should talk of a notional rather than of an actual ekphrasis. As noted by Peter Green:

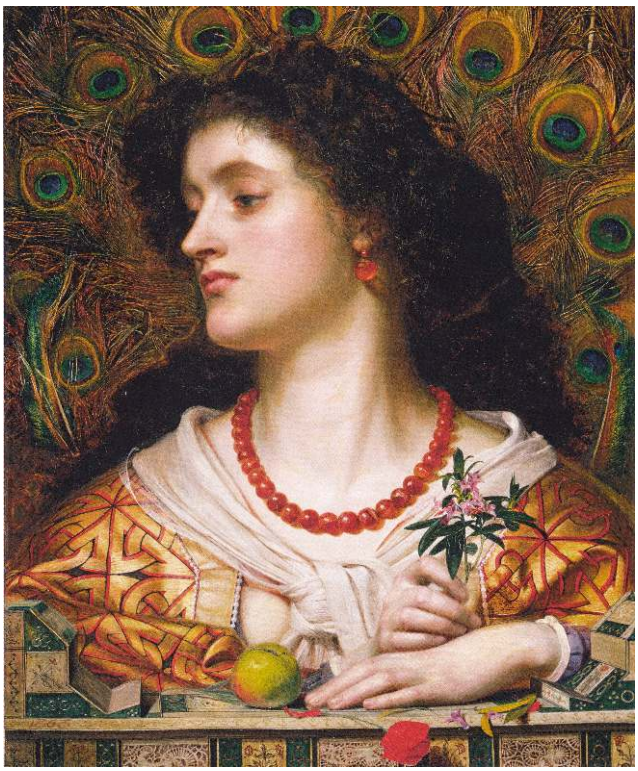
> Perhaps most remarkably, the Fleece itself, the *raison d'être* of this entire epic geste, remains a complete [...] mystery. The full reason for its grail-like desirability, which can send a shipload of the brightest and best to Kolchis and back is never explained. We are not even told what generates its unearthly magical glow (4.172-3, 177-8, 185). Apollonius, speaking of its 'ruddy blush like a flame' (173) clearly has in mind a deep metallic red-gold such as that of the royal larnax from Tomb II at Vergina (but) what substance are we looking at here? (Green 40)

30 In ancient sources, the Fleece indeed appears as an impossible and indescribable object. This is all the more surprising as Apollonius was himself very much indebted to the Homeric ekphrastic tradition. For instance, the description of Jason's dazzling purple cloak (decorated with seven distinct scenes, including one representing Phrixos with the magic ram) is strongly reminiscent of Homer's famous ekphrasis of Achilles' shield in the *Iliad*: "you could cast your eyes more easily on the rising sun than gaze at that cloak's red colour" (1.725-726). But the object of Jason's quest remains almost invisible, a visual aporia which Sandys in his *Medea* signals by representing it against a golden background, thus paradoxically highlighting *and* cancelling its visual impact.

31 Interestingly the gilded background recounting Medea's past life as well as the costly pigments that Sandys used for this work lead him to abandon oil painting, which he, apparently, could no longer afford. Moreover, in this composition, the flat gold background strongly resembles a Japanese painted screen. Sandys may have seen such golden screens at the Japanese exhibit at the London International Exhibition of 1862 in South Kensington or at John McNeill Whistler's studio: in the American painter's *Caprice in Purple and Gold, The Golden Screen* (1864), a Japanese golden screen indeed occupies most of the pictorial space. But Sandys himself had already experimented with similar motifs

and colour combinations in previous paintings, for instance for his sorceress *Vivien* (1863) who wears a golden Asian mantle. In *Grace Rose* (1866) we also find an antique Japanese painted screen with a gold ground which clearly prefigures the *Medea*. In keeping with the eclecticism of Morris’s tale, this Greek and Japanese mural is inscribed with an anachronistic array of ancient Greek, Japanese, Chinese and Egyptian stylized motifs—again, text and image seem closely interwoven with gold immediately drawing the attention of the viewer to that complex interaction.

James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Caprice in Purple and Gold, The Golden Screen* (1864), oil on panel, 50.1x68.5cm, Freer Gallery of Art, Creative Commons



Frederick Sandys, *Vivien* (1863), oil on canvas, 64x52.5cm, Manchester Art Gallery, Creative Commons

Frederick Sandys, *Grace Rose* (1866), oil on canvas, 55.9x45.4cm, Yale Center for British Art, Creative Commons

32 However, contrary to Morris’s sympathetic approach to the deserted Colchian princess, Sandys’s Medea is depicted in ambiguous terms. Sandys’s model for the Colchian witch

was no angelic blond, but the dark-haired gipsy girl Keomi Gray (Elzea 184 *sq*). She was the painter's mistress whom he abandoned after finishing this work, in a strange *mise en abyme* of the Medean myth. Although he was also reading Morris's poem at the time, Sandys mainly drew his inspiration from Euripides' *Medea*. In keeping with this classical source, the painting represents the frightening sorceress in the process of poisoning the blood-red threads of the fatal dress. Whereas Medea in Morris's poem ironically offers a burning golden mantle to the future bride of the hero of the Golden Fleece, Sandys remains more faithful to Euripides' version in which Medea gives Jason's beloved a multicoloured (*poikilos*) veil tainted with poison (*pharmaka* 789) as well as a burning golden tiara. But Sandys suppresses the golden tiara. This introduces a dichotomy between her colourful and highly sexualized witchcraft on the one hand—the materiality of the *pharmaka* she manipulates suggesting a form of sensuality, highlighted by her open mouth—and a purely aesthetic and decorative use of gold (relegated to the background), on the other. In Morris, the ambiguity of the *femme fatale* is somehow displaced onto the metal ore which is meant to signify both beauty and dangerous ambition.

33 If Sandys's painting was inspired by both Morris and Euripides, it also triggered the ekphrastic impulse of Alfred Bate Richards who published in 1869 a poem entitled *Medea*, illustrated with a black & white photograph of Sandys's picture. This rather second-rate poem opens with a tribute to this "chef d'œuvre" about which Richards explains that "No photograph, however admirable, could possibly convey the colouring" (Richards viii). But if colours are missing from the reproduction of the painting, gold is nonetheless strikingly present on the cover of the book richly decorated with golden motifs and a red edge, reminiscent of the bright red coral necklace of Medea at the very centre of the composition. In the poem, however, gold and colour are no longer praised for their ornamental quality or for their association with a rich material culture but are solely made to serve as moral signifiers, notably of Medea's depravation. Addressing the female figure in Sandys's painting, the poetic persona thus exclaims:

> Lo! As that mute, sad Semblance I address,
> The faded satin of each hollow cheek,
> Long touch by finger thin of weariness
> Burns crimson bright with deep carnation streak;
> Till, serpent-like, uncoil to that strange heat
> The musky tangles of her raven hair. (Richards 33)

Here burning crimson is given pride of place over gold, so as to both anticipate the burning pain of Glauce and suggest how beauty and power can be tainted with blood and desire.

34 This dissociation of gold and red, which is equally reflected in the composition of Sandys's painting, clearly separating the decorative golden background from its colourful foreground, contrasts with Morris's exploration of the complex erotic and aesthetic dynamics of the quest for the Golden Fleece. In keeping with Apollonius and Chaucer, Morris, contrary to Richards and to a certain extent Sandys, used gold as a hybrid and ambiguous signifier of Jason's (rather than Medea's) fall on the one hand and of the rich and colourful material culture of by-gone ages "gleaming with gold, and blue and cinnabar" on the other. But Morris also resorted to this close articulation of the artistic and moral / political value of gold in his later tales and poems such as "The Lady of the Land", which like "The Life and Death of Jason" conflates classical and medieval references to depict both the chryselephantine beauty and the "greed of power" brought about by the "gleaming" precious metal:

In one quick glance these things his eyes did see,
But speedily they turned round to behold
Another sight, for throned on ivory
There sat a girl, whose dripping tresses rolled
On to the floor in waves of gleaming gold,
Cast back from such a form as, erewhile shown
To one poor shepherd, lighted up Troy town.
[...]
For now she spoke in gentle voice and clear,
Using the Greek tongue that he knew full well;
"What man art thou, that thus hast wandered here,
And found this lonely chamber where I dwell?
Beware, beware! for I have many a spell;
If greed of power and gold have led thee on,
Not lightly shall this untold wealth be won". (Morris 1868, 4: 132-3)

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NOTES

1. The pastoral tragicomedy *Il Pastor Fido* ("The Faithful Shepherd") was first published in 1590. It describes a bucolic semi-mythical Arcadia:
O happy age of gold, when first
The infant wold by milk was nursed,
When trees the cradles did supply,
And whistling winds the lullaby; ...
No mortal then did ever feel
Th' insidious draught or wounding steel.
No gloomy thoughts, obscure as night
Eclipsed the rays of reason's light.
2. Swinburne in his review of Morris's poem published in the *Fortnightly* in July 1867 emphasizes this influence of Chaucerian storytelling, with reference to the two poets' "purity and justice for colour" (Faulkner 60). Swinburne would certainly have known by then that "The Life and Death of Jason" was part of a continuing series to be published as *The Earthly Paradise*, which would contain an envoi addressed to Chaucer.
3. Augusta Webster who was close to the Pre-Raphaelites and in particular W.M. Rossetti also wrote in 1870 a poem entitled "Medea in Athens" which is a proto-feminist vindication of the abandoned princess's plight. Interestingly gold is only mentioned once in the poem and not in connection with the Fleece or Jason but in reference to the sudden bright highlights of Medea's "brown hair" as she denounces her unfaithful lover. On Webster and Morris, see Boos 2007.
4. For instance with the reference to the "Fleece of Gold" (VII, 109).
5. Frederick Sandys, *Danae in the Brazen Chamber* (1888), wood engraving, Victoria and Albert Museum.
6. "Here then, they spread the great bed and over it threw the gleaming golden fleece, so that the wedding might be honoured and worthy of song".
7. To please the gods, *agalmata* (or antique votive statues) were also covered in gold.
8. Morris describes his "locks of gold / Curled thick and close" (III, 47).
9. In this painting, both Medea and Jason are depicted as blond.
10. On Medea's *pharmaka*, see Grand-Clément and Ribeyrol 103-118.
11. Hypsipyle was the queen of Lemnos and the lover of Jason for two years until his flight with Medea and the Golden Fleece. In his *Heroides*, Ovid has her write a letter to Jason describing her ill-fated encounter with the hero (Ovid 6.73).
12. See Florence Boos, Morris Online Edition.
13. I would like to thank Timothy Alborn for drawing my attention to this passage.
14. No wonder therefore such mythical references were used in the press at the time to describe the 19th century gold rush, as shown by this extract from the *Caledonian Mercury*: "Latest from the Crimea!": "There is some talk of gold in the Crimea—auriferous veins, beds, or dust enough to tempt a new colony of adventurers. We are reminded of Jason's expedition to Colchis three thousand years ago. No doubt the Golden Fleece brought home by the Argonauts, from the south-eastern shores of the Euxiae, represents wealth [...] all national myths, however much they may distort the truth, undoubtedly had a foundation in national history [...] as the allied fleets are within a day's sail of the spot where the feat was originally performed, I would commend the varied experience of the Argonauts to the respectful consideration of the Admirals! (*Caledonian Mercury*, 22 October 1855, 3). I would like to thank Timothy Alborn for drawing my attention to this passage.
15. For a closer analysis of the use of this "ruddy gold" in Antiquity, see Riegl, 307 *sq*.

16. Morris uses the expression "golden dreams" (V, 75).
17. See for instance III, 45-46: "If wide reports says true, / That even now with cinnabar and blue / Men paint your long ship's prow, and shave the oars / With sharpened planes". A few lines above (40) "great gifts of gold" are said to be used "To make the new ship's goodly prow withal".
18. Like the ruby, cinnabar which is the ore of mercury, is a mineral producing a bright scarlet red used by artists in Antiquity.
19. On Morris's nostalgia for the colours of the past, see Ribeyrol 2012.
20. On this "heavenly blue" (XV, 222), see Pastoureau 2000.
21. For an analysis of this passage, see Purdon 216-219.

ABSTRACTS

This essay explores the central role played by gold in the chromatic economy of William Morris's "Life and Death of Jason" (1867). In this long narrative poem, the metal ore appears as an ambiguous signifier. On the one hand, it is made to function as a metaphorical and metonymical sign of Jason's quest and ambition which contrasts with the plight of Medea, the abandoned Colchian princess whom the Pre-Raphaelites often depicted in a sympathetic way. But on the other hand, the close association of gold with other expensive, age-old pigments such as cinnabar equally reveals Morris's desire to shed light on the wealth of the arts and crafts of a bygone golden age which he and his artist friends equally sought to emulate in their works for the firm "Morris and co". My aim will therefore be to show how Morris looked towards the colours of an ideologically charged past and in particular towards the colourful materiality of Hellenic arts in order to retrieve the meaningful dyeing processes which he believed modern science and economic imperatives had stripped of their symbolic and artistic value. To this end, I will also analyze Frederick Sandys's 1868 *Medea* with its golden background which was partly inspired by Morris's poem and which may be considered as both a powerful statement on the rich material culture of Greek antiquity and as a moral condemnation of the colourful witchcraft (*pharmaka*) of the *femme fatale*.

Cet article explore le rôle central joué par l'or dans l'économie chromatique du poème « The Life and Death of Jason » (1867) de William Morris. Dans ce texte, le précieux métal apparaît comme un signifiant des plus ambigus. D'une part, il semble signaler métaphoriquement autant que métonymiquement l'ambition et la quête de Jason, en opposition au sort tragique de la princesse abandonnée, Médée, qui fut souvent présentée sous un jour positif par certains artistes et poètes préraphaélites. Mais en associant l'or à des pigments anciens et rares, tels que le cinabre, Morris souhaitait également mettre en lumière la richesse des arts de cet âge d'or qui inspira de nombreuses œuvres aux collaborateurs de la firme « Morris and co ». Il s'agira donc de montrer comment cet artiste, également très engagé politiquement, a choisi de se tourner vers les teintes prétendument plus stables d'un passé idéalisé, afin de renouer avec des pratiques colorantes ancestrales qu'il jugeait davantage signifiantes d'un point de vue symbolique et esthétique. À cette fin, j'analyserai également le tableau de Frederick Sandys (1868) représentant une Médée sur fond d'or, tableau qui fut en partie inspiré par le poème de Morris, dont il reflète la richesse matérielle tout en condamnant l'immoralité de la sorcière aux multiples pharmaka.

INDEX

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AUTHORS

CHARLOTTE RIBEYROL

Maître de conférences en littérature britannique du XIX[e] siècle, Université Paris-Sorbonne, VALE EA 4085, IUF, Marie Curie *Fellow* (Trinity College, Oxford, 2016-2018).
Thèmes de recherche : hellénisme victorien, poésie et peinture victoriennes, matérialité de la couleur, reception studies, W. Morris, W. Pater, J. Ruskin, A.C. Swinburne, J.A. Symonds